

# The New York Times

## Gender-Fluid Artists Come Out of the Gray Zone

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Martine Gutierrez's  
"Line Up 1," from 2014,  
a photographic series in  
which the artist is styled  
to blend seamlessly with  
glamorous mannequins.  
Ryan Lee, New York

In the window of the New Museum this month, the performance artist Justin Vivian Bond plans to periodically strike a pose in a pink gown with rhinestone teardrop, framed by hand-drawn wallpaper twinning the artist's face with that of the former Estée Lauder model Karen Graham. As a closeted transgender teenager in the 1970s, Bond obsessively drew Ms. Graham, until "I made myself my canvas." The artist is wearing a vintage dress by Frank Masandrea, one of several little-known couturiers who outfitted Ms. Graham before AIDS cut them down in their creative prime.

The project, "My Model/MySelf: I'll Stand by You," proudly puts what Bond calls a "queer face" on the glamour created by gay people that has long been appropriated by mainstream culture. The designers "served the aspirational whim of wealthy upper-class white women and then were completely dismissed by history," the artist said.

Bond is one of more than 40 intergenerational artists in “Trigger: Gender as a Tool and a Weapon,” opening on Sept. 27 with work that explores gender beyond the binary of “male” and “female.”

It is the largest show to date at a major museum to tackle gender fluidity, which has become native to young people who are used to constructing their own identities on social media and declaring their preferred personal pronouns on college campuses and at workplaces. And as the highly charged debates over transgender rights swirl in the news — from President Trump’s call for a ban on transgender service members in the United States military to the laws governing access to public bathrooms and locker rooms to harassment in prisons — “Trigger” brings a new level of visibility to gender-fluid artists who have only been acknowledged before in a trickle of mainstream shows.

“This show is attempting to identify without codifying something that may be completely alien to 20th-century folks still grappling with feminist issues and gay rights,” said Lisa Phillips, director of the New Museum, long known for its politically themed exhibitions.

Since Charles W. Leslie and Fritz Lohman began showing work by gay artists in their loft in 1969, gender fluidity has been part of the mix, said Gonzalo Casals, director of the Leslie-Lohman Museum of Gay and Lesbian Art in SoHo. “But it’s very important for mainstream museums — not just for cultural specific museums like mine — to show that work,” he added. “The best way you can alienate a community is by denying them their reflection in society.”

Survey shows have traditionally relied on establishing categories like “women-only” or “Latin American artists.” The curator of “Trigger,” Johanna Burton, is intent on disrupting categorization, much as the artists are personally doing.

“Some of the activist work we think of from the AIDS crisis was really didactic,” said Ms. Burton, who promises that the New Museum exhibition “won’t look like a political show from the ’80s. Beauty and pleasure are really primary for these artists and are seen as a mode of resistance.”

Sadie Benning’s lush new series of photographs titled “rainy day/gender,” for instance, are self-portraits shot through droplets on a windshield in a way that makes the artist’s body appear surreal and almost incomprehensible.

Mickalene Thomas explores lesbian desire in her 12-monitor video grid, “Me as Muse,” presenting herself reclining naked on a couch and focusing the gaze on different parts of her body.

Candice Lin and Patrick Staff’s smoke machine will pump testosterone-lowering, plant-based tinctures into the museum lobby in their piece “Hormonal Fog” — sure to both delight and startle viewers when they learn what they are breathing.

The show considers gender in relationship to race, class and sexuality. About half the artists are nonwhite. Most identify as queer — the term for nonconforming sexual identity that includes lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender people. And some, like the filmmaker Wu Tsang, reject the gender spectrum altogether. “The art itself doesn’t have to be tethered to the biography of

the artist,” Ms. Burton said.

“Trigger” warning: This show is intended to challenge viewers, and some may find the concept of gender as a moving target difficult to accept.

Just days ago, conservative critics succeeded in getting Santander Cultural, an arts center in Porto Alegre, Brazil, to shut down the exhibition “Queermuseum” amid accusations that it advertised pedophilia and blasphemy.

“Transgender and gender nonconforming expressions have been around forever,” said Erin Christovale, the co-curator of the roving film program “Black Radical Imagination” who recently started work at the Hammer Museum. “What’s new is that people are claiming these terms very proudly and these terms are starting to be valued.”

With the rise of transgender characters in popular television shows, including “Transparent” and “Orange Is the New Black,” art galleries are getting in on the trend. Diamond Stingily, a transgender woman and, at 27, one of the youngest artists in “Trigger,” will show new sculpture and video in a solo exhibition opening later this month at Ramiken Crucible in Los Angeles.

“The art world is interested now because everybody wants to be woke,” Ms. Stingily said. “That’s a good thing if it gets more people who look like me to come into those spaces and not have them be so exclusive to a predominantly white audience.”

For “Trigger” she is making a braid of synthetic black hair more than 200 feet long that will descend through the four gallery floors of the New Museum, summoning the strength and beauty of “racialized” hair and characters ranging from Medusa to Rapunzel.

Ronald Feldman Fine Arts in SoHo begins its season this week with a solo show by the performance artist Cassils (formerly known as Heather Cassils). On view is a glass cube containing 200 gallons of the artist’s urine, collected in the months since the Trump administration reversed President Obama’s protections for transgender students to use bathrooms consistent with their gender identities.

Carlos Motta, an artist known for his multimedia work documenting queer communities, calls attention to the underreported discrimination against gender-nonconforming refugees. In his 11 video portraits going on view this week at the Stedelijk Museum in Amsterdam, refugees recount the oppression they experienced in their homelands in the Middle East and at refugee camps in the Netherlands.

Mr. Motta is skeptical, however, whether representation in the privileged art world really leads to political change.

“Of course it is important to tell people’s stories, but who is actually benefiting by projecting a film in a museum and what is this discourse actually doing for communities at stake?” Mr. Motta asked. He has looked for ways to bridge the socioeconomic gap between art institutions and the marginalized people he films, including using some of his own exhibition funding to give copies

of his videos to trans organizations for their own promotion.

Juliana Huxtable, one of the most discussed artists in the New Museum's 2015 Triennial because of its representations of her nude transgender body, also questioned whether greater visibility for transgender art will lead to social progress.

Are "audiences obsessed with and consuming media about transness tapping into a derivative pornographic obsession with transgender bodies?" she asked, in an interview in a new anthology, "Trap Door: Trans Cultural Production and the Politics of Visibility," to be published in November by the New Museum. "Or are they putting me on display as a circus freak show?"

"That's the anxiety that I've gotten from the whole situation, because I think that the policing and the violence against trans people have a direct relationship to that increase in visibility."

Ms. Huxtable pointed out that her work that doesn't present herself in a sexualized way doesn't sell. "No one wants to buy work that doesn't seem seductive," she said.

Ms. Burton estimated that two-thirds of the artists in "Trigger" have no gallery representation at all.

Martine Gutierrez, who never identified as a male and is currently transitioning to a woman, struggled to conform to the demands of the art world when she first began showing work. "They want the artist to define themselves and they want the work to be defined, especially if the artist is in the work," Ms. Gutierrez said. This proved unnerving when her identity hovered in a gray area.

Images from her 2014 photographic series, "Lineups," in which the artist is styled to blend seamlessly with groupings of glamorous female mannequins, are on view in the group show "Converging Voices: Gender and Identity" at the Hofstra University Museum in Hempstead, N.Y. "This body of work was my first inclination to realizing that I wanted to be seen as a woman," said Ms. Gutierrez, who is now comfortable using the female pronoun.

In 2013, as transgender people began to be included in institutions of legitimacy and power, Chris E. Vargas, a multimedia artist, invented the fictional Museum of Transgender Hirstory & Art, or MOTH A, as a form of institutional critique. It started as a logo and poster with images of more than 250 gender nonconforming heroes, from Chaz Bono to Peppermint Patty, that will be on view in "Trigger." Mr. Vargas's project has snowballed into tongue-in-cheek events and lectures that he performs in the guise of MOTH A's executive director. (He will be delivering a performance at the New Museum.)

"Is it the responsibility of an art and history institution, one that is dedicated to a historically marginalized community, to join the mainstream celebration of liberal inclusion?" Mr. Vargas mused in his essay in "Trap Door." "Or should that institution stay faithful to its history, rooted in disruption and transgression?"

Ms. Burton, the curator, said that while no artist approached for the exhibition turned her down,

she is acutely aware of the issues and responsibilities of injecting these clamorous voices into the ivory tower. She doesn't want "Trigger" to be too easily digestible.

"If the show is done right, and I hope it is, it makes people interested but doesn't allow them to think they fully understand something," she said. "If you stop thinking about yourself as a stable identity looking at something made by another stable identity, at least for the duration of the show, it changes the whole game."

"And some people," she predicted, "won't like that."

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